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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9245
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1501
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1678
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0029
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
RUMICEA/JICCENT MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000871

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: GSE ORDERS CATHOLIC CHURCH FOREIGN STAFF TO LEAVE

REF: A. A) 06 ASMARA 1058

[1](#)B. B) ASMARA 338

[1](#)C. C) ASMARA 699

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Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) On October 31, the Immigration Office of the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) delivered a letter to the Catholic Secretariat of Eritrea, informing them that the office would no longer extend the residency and work permits of foreign sisters and priests working in Eritrea under expired permits. According to a sister of the Filippini order, several priests from the Catholic Secretariat represented the foreign sisters and priests at a

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November 6 meeting called by the Immigration Office. During the meeting, the Immigration official informed them that the sisters and priests with expired permits must leave the country by November 20. When the Catholic Secretariat members asked the reason for the expulsions, the Immigration official reportedly stated "that is not my department." (Comment: The October 31 notification letter was copied to the Office of Religious Affairs, indicating that this office and the Office of National Security, which oversees it, made the decision. End Comment.)

[1](#)2. (U) This order follows a similar GSE notification in late March 2007 that foreign priests and sisters would have to leave the country within 30 days (Ref B). In May 2007, these individuals were granted a four-month extension. This extension expired at the end of September despite the Catholic Church's repeated requests for residency permit renewals. The GSE's expulsion order will affect most of the Church's foreign workers: seven sisters and five priests with U.S., Phillipine, Columbian, Mexican and Italian citizenship. (Comment: The GSE's demand is confusing and inconsistent as the week prior two foreign sisters had their residency and work permits renewed. End Comment.)

[1](#)3. (C) The order continues a year-long tussle between the Catholic Church and the GSE over control of Church

activities. Combined with this expulsion demand, the GSE continues its efforts to take over Church properties and programs (Refs A & C). While the Church successfully rebuffed GSE efforts in August 2007 to take over properties and programs of the Catholic Church, the GSE apparently seized a farm administered by an Eritrean brother outside of Dubarwa (a town about 25 kilometers from Asmara), during the last week of October. According to the Filippini sister, when the GSE officials came to take possession of the farm, the Eritrean brother refused to vacate the property. The GSE officials then returned with armed personnel. (Comment: The sister had no idea which branch of the GSE these officials represented. Post speculates they were from the Office of National Security. This office generally serves as the implementation office for actions such as these. End Comment.) The GSE officials detained the brother for four days, during which they consolidated their holding of the property, including seizing a truck.

¶4. (C) The Papal Nuncio for Eritrea, based in Khartoum, was in Asmara over the weekend of November 3. During his visit he protested the GSE's actions to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Note: The Papal Nuncio has not been formally accredited yet to the GSE. This was his second visit to Asmara and on both occasions, the GSE denied his requests to present his credentials to President Isaias . End Note.) Simultaneously, the Vatican called in the GSE Ambassador (who is based in Berlin) to register their protest to the GSE's actions as well. To date, the GSE has provided no response to the protests. The Italian Deputy Head of Mission told Poloff that he believes if the GSE does not provide a suitable response soon, the Catholic Church in Asmara and in the Vatican intend to raise the GSE's actions with the international media.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The Catholic Church and the GSE remain on a collision course. The expulsion of these particular 12 foreign sisters and priests will impact many social programs provided by the Church, as a significant portion are overseen

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by the foreign staff. Their departure would also eliminate the strongest voice of protest against the GSE's bid to take possession of Church property and programs. While Post expects the Church's programs would be able to continue, at least initially, under the capable management of Eritrean sisters and priests, these individuals are at high risk of detention/reprisal if they run afoul of the GSE. Post believes that the local Bishops would maintain the Church's independent position and not fold under GSE pressure, however we could easily envision a scenario that includes the arrest or removal of the current bishop or greater GSE control over autonomous Church affairs. End Comment.

¶6. English translation of letter sent to Catholic Secretariat of Eritrea from Immigration Office on October 31,

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¶2007. Begin text:

To the Catholic Secretariat of Eritrea
Re: Members with expired Residence Permit of Visa

The Immigration office wrote a letter asking some of your members to leave the country. But the implementation of the decision was postponed, because you asked to extend the time for they were in fasting and prayers. When the time allotted elapsed, you asked again to give them more time and it was granted accordingly. And of late some representatives from your office approached us to extend the time. They were told clearly not only that it is impossible, but they can even be persecuted (prosecuted) by law for staying in the country with the residence permit already expired. Instead a good number of your members never presented themselves to the Immigration office while holding expired residence permits. This shows that you did not give a positive response to the

collaboration and the indication given to you.

Therefore, we are urging you to present to the Immigration office all your members with expired residence permits on 06-11-07. If then do not present themselves on the fixed day, we inform that we shall take legal action.

Victory to the broad masses!

Lieutenant Colonel Sium Kidane
In charge of Foreigners' Department

Copy: Religious Affairs Office.

End text.
MCINTYRE